

Roman Catholic work among the Garos

(1911-1933)

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The role played by the American Baptist Missionaries among the Garos has been ably presented by different Authors in recent years.¹ Little however is yet known about the Roman Catholic Missionary work among them, in the early decades of this century.² The purpose of this paper is to throw some light on this period of Catholic Mission History among the Garos.

From time immemorial, the Garos inhabited not only the British demarcated Garo Hills District but the adjoining districts of Mymensingh in the South and Kamrup and Goalpara in the North. The earliest Christianised Garos were those who lived outside the Garo Hills.

While the French and American Catholic Holy Cross Missionaries worked in East Bengal from 1854 to date, Assam was the mission field of Jacopo Broy of the Milanese Foreign Missions (1872-90), German Salvatorian Missionaries (1890-1915), Belgian Jesuits (1915-22), and the Salesians of Don Bosco (1922 onwards). The American Baptist Missionaries in the meanwhile pioneered in the Christianization and development of the Garos of Assam and Garo Hills. The Australian Baptist and the Anglican High Church did a similar yeoman service among the Garos of the district of Mymensing. In the early years of this century, however, the Catholics gained a foothold in the field of Higher Education. Their schools in Dacca as well as Shillong became centres for boys and girls of all religions and denominations. Consequently educated Garos were therefore interested in having Catholic Institutions among them. Invitations were extended both to Dacca and to Shillong for Catholic Missionaries. However, shortage of Personnel and resources did not permit the Catholics to accept the invitation of the Garos.

Among the Garos of Mymensingh³ Catholic Missionary Work

The initiative to open a mission centre among the Garos of Mymensingh was taken by the Garos themselves. Five literate Garos from the village of Susang in

N. Mymensingh walked forty miles to the nearest railway station and boarded the train for Dacca in search of the "Chief Guru" of the Catholic Church. It was the year 1909 and Mgr. Peter Joseph Hurth⁴ received them graciously. According to them, their determination to learn about the Catholic Church, the "Adi Dharma" of the Christian Churches, which they suspected to be the true Church and their disillusionment with the local Baptist Pastor who fled when epidemic struck the village, were the Principal reasons for their adventurous journey to Dacca.⁵ They requested Mgr. Hurth to send a missionary to reside in their village and instruct them in the catholic Faith. The Bishop was then, in dire straits for want of missionary personnel. After congratulating and encouraging them for their courageous decision, he gave them Bengali Catholic prayer books and Catechism books to learn and promised them a priest as soon as he was able.

Undaunted, the delegation returned to Dacca within a year. They had learned what the books contained, and the new Bishop Mgr. Francis Frederick Linneborn⁶ could not but send two of his men Fr. Jean-Marie Joseph Fleury,⁷ and Bro. Eugene lefevre⁸ to susang. Dispite the enormous difficulties of travel, the two men were favourably impressed by the good disposition of the vast Garo population towards Catholicism and prevailed upon the Bishop to establish a mission among the Garos. Bishop Linneborn chose Adolphe Francais,⁹ a veteran missonary and Timothy John Crowley¹⁰ a young American to pioneer the Garo mission foundation. In 1911 they established their residence at Tausalpara with the help of the group who called them from Dacca and build a chapel. In 1913, Mathew Kearns¹¹ a native of New York replaced Fr. Francais. His arrival coincided with a Cholera epidemic and his selfless ministry to the victims so endeared him to the Garos that they wanted to be Catholics. 21 Garos were baptized on 19th March 1913 and slowly many others followed them into the Catholic fold. Kearns built a school and residence for the missionary at Tausalpara but ill health forced him out of the difficult mission and Adolphe Francais returned to Tausalpara.

Fr. Francois moved his centre across the Sameswari river to Ranikhong and established there, new buildings. The number of Catholics Garos amounted in 1915 to nearly 400. Bitten by a poisonous snake,¹¹ Francois was forced to retire in 1917 and Joseph Harel¹² an American, helped by Clement Dutt, a brilliant Bengali Catechist, spread the Faith far and near. Sub centres were established in places like Haluaghat, Daripani, Galnoi, Lakkuagaon, Jomidarbitta and Biroidakunni, each having a school. Children from villages that could not be reached by these centres were often sent to various boardings in different Mission Centres of the Dacca diocese to be trained as future Teachers and Catechists.

While Harel established permanent residential buildings, School, hostel, weaving school and Church at Ranikhong, Christopher Brooks¹³ another American build new residential Stations first at Jomidarbitha¹⁴ and then at Bhalukapara 3 miles to the East. Frank Wyss¹⁴ and Bro. Severin¹⁵ established yet another centre at Biroidakunni, in 1927. A year later, the fourth residential Mission Station was established Mymensingh the Headquarters of the District itself. Here, unlike, in other centres the Missionary sisters were resident. They were, the Catechist Missionaries of Mary Immaculate from France.¹⁶

By 1927, the Holy Cross Missionaries had recognized the work among the Garos as the most important. They put aside men and resources in a large way for the responsive tribals. In 1930, Francis P. Goodal¹⁷ directed Ranikhong although he was the Vicar General of the Dacca Diocese and he build there a middle English School to favour the Garo children for Higher Education. Instead at Bhalukapara, Christopher Brooks established the Catechist School which supplied well-trained and zealous Garo Young men to help the missionary for the work of development and Christianization of his people. Although American and world economic slump of 1930 badly affected speedy expansion of Mission work among the Garos, by 1938, there were 8 Centres with resident missionaries and many sub-centres in Mymensingh district. The ordination to the Priesthood on 29 Jan., 1938 of Fr. Damian Ruram, a young Garo from Ranikhong crowned the dedicated work of the Holy Cross for the Garos.¹⁸

Catholic Missionary Work among the Garos in Assam

Paucity of personnel and means prevented the Salvatorian missionaries who worked for the Khasis and the Tea-garden workers of the Brahmaputra and Surma valleys, to send men to the Garo Hills. Rudolf Fontaine¹⁹ was the missionary ministering to the Brahmaputra valley from his residence at St. Joseph's Church, Gauhati and the requests from the Garos came to him. In 1913, he came across Col. Halliday²⁰, the Deputy Commissioner who invited him to Tura. On Saturday 8th Nov. 1913, he embarked the steamer kabali bound for Rowmari from where he headed for Tura via Mankachar and Garobada. On 12th Nov., as he entered the village Damalgiri, a Garo village between Garobada and Tura, he met a 60 year old Anglo-Indian, W.E. Elliott. He had come to Tura in 1888 as a member of the Military police and had become later its band-master.²¹ After the death of his first wife, he had married a Garo lady and in spite of pressure from the Baptists, he had remained firm in his Catholic Faith.

The News of the impending arrival of Fontaine had been made known by halliday in and around Tura. The Baptist pastors had, however warned their students from meeting him. At Tura Rudolf Fontaine was treated as the honoured guest of the European Officials. To his surprise he was informed that the Government officials and some of the influential Garos had already chosen a site for the Catholic Mission.

The principal motive to have a Catholic Mission in Garo Hills seemed to have been the desire of both the Garos and the Government officials to have institution that would offer better standard of education than what the Baptists had. Jobang Marak, who had come to meet Fontaine on his way to Tura seemed to have played a prominent part in this request for a good school. Jubang was a baptist who had received his education in the United States but had been recalled by the missionaries before he could complete his university studies, on the plea that he had to become the headmaster of a High School. But on his return he was made the head Master of a Middle School and given a salary of Rs. 70/- per month.²² "The Baptist Missionaries instruct the people

only to a certain degree", Fontains was told, "There is not even one Garo who would be able to write an English letter without somebody's help"²³.

Another equally important reason for discontent against the Baptists was the complaint that they remained exclusively at Tura and would not visit the people in other areas except once a year. Moreover, they had expelled many people from their Churches for a variety of reasons. Certain peculiar Garo marriage laws and customs, drinking of Rice beer, and dancing went against the Baptist code of ethics, according to what Fontaine could understand²⁴.

Under the likely influence of Jobang Marak, 54 hostellers of the Baptists assisted at the Mass celebrated by Fontaine at the Government bungalow on 16th Nov., 1913. On his visit to an important Garo Village, Fontaine accepted deliberately the drink of Rice beer and requested the Garos to perform a dance. This gesture which would have been uncharacteristic of a Baptist Missionary, endeared him to the simple Garos. Col. Halliday too informed his guest that the Garos wanted a more cheerful form of Christianity than what the Baptist had to offer²⁵.

On his return journey, Rudolf Fontaine spent a night at Demalgiri instructing Mr. Elliot and his family. He solemnized their Baptism on the morrow, and blessed the marriage of the Elliots. The eldest daughter and husband, a certain Chongrim Momin were asked to await Fontaine's return, for their baptism. Fontaine then joined the D.C. who was proceeding to Bengal, on his journey towards the Brahmaputra. Using the services of the D.C.'s interpreter, Fontaine preached to a large crowd that had come for their market at Garobada. At Goalpara two Salvatorian sisters who had gone on a sick call met the party. Fontaine next stopped at Nishangram, a Baptist centre where non-Christian leaders and former Baptists welcomed him, and eagerly listened to his talks on the Catholic Faith.

Back in Gauhati Fontaine appealed to his superiors in Europe for zealous young priests who would be ready to work for the Garos, among whom he expected a mass-conversion movement. In a letter to Fontaine congratulating him for his successful tour, Col. Halliday the Deputy Commissioner of Garo Hills expressed his hopes, "I am

Sure that a missionary station of your church would be a good deal of Good among the Garos". He continued, "Please write whether you have taken already a decision regarding the opening of a station at Tura". The outbreak of the terrible war in Germany dashed all hopes of opening a Catholic Mission at Tura. Nearly 20 years passed before such plan materialized. The Germans were first interned and later sent back to their country²⁶.

Early Salesian Missionary Work among the Garos

During the war years and immediately after, Garo Catholics as well as Catechumens from Mymensingh had been migrating to villages of Garo Hills and Assam. Delegations from these like Netri, Baigumbari, Rangasora and Chikkasin came to Fr. Gil²⁷, a Spanish Salesian who he ministered to the whole of Brahmaputra Valley, he ministered to the whole of Brahmaputra Valley, since 1922. Gil visited some of these villages where he baptized some of the catechumens and built the first Catholic chapel at Baigumbari and opened a small school for 20 boys.

The first apostle²⁸ of the Garos was himself a Garo-Peter Shem Momin. While undergoing training as an Agricultural demonstrator in Shillong, he came into contact with a Khasi Catholic leader Babu Leo Herrick and become a Catholic. After a short period of time Peter resigned from the Government services and became a full time evangelist. he won over several villages near Damra to the Catholic Church. laskarpara became the main Catholic centre while other villages which had sizable numbers of Catholics were Chotcholja, Damit Apal, Karkutta, Dilma etc. According to Fr. Pianazzi, there were a few Catholics even in Tura at the time of Fr. Gil but later they migrated to elsewhere. Successors of Gil at Guwahati, Vincent Scuderi, Leo Pasecki and Marmol used to visit the Garo villages annually. They used to go even to villages near Bagmara travelling part of the distance by Mymensingh railwsay line. But they could communicate only through Hindi. In 1926 a persecution against the Garo Catholics was started (reportedly at the instigation of²⁹ Rev. Harding) by the Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Walker. He considered no Christian denomination other than the Amarican Baptists

legitimate in the Garo Hills and ordered the Catholic chapels and schools to be destroyed and the Catholics of Chotcholja to be expelled. Peter Shem appealed to Mgr. Mathias, prefect-apostolic of Assam, who in turn made representation before the Governor of Assam. Although the D.C. was soon transferred, the administration in Tura did not change its anti-Catholic policy for another 7 years.

In 1931, Vincent Scuderi³⁰ toured the scattered villages of Catholics throughout Garo Hills on foot, to comfort the Catholic Garos and dispense sacraments. Several had already abandoned the Faith. Mgr. Mathias set apart a young Italian priest, Archimedes Pianazzi³¹ to learn Garo and found the Catholic Faith among the Garos on a permanent footing. Jobang Marak who had then become a Catholic and worked in Gauhati, taught Pianazzi the Garo language. In 1932 along with Aloysius Rocca³² he established a temporary centre at Dhubri from where they would go into Garo Hills to work among their flock. At Dhubri, they collected the more zealous and intelligent literate Garos from the various villages to train them as Catechists. New families in and around Dalu were converted at that time, and a community was formed there, under the leadership of Pukan Sangma. Pianazzi also busied himself with the publication of two little books in Garo, viz. Jisuna Rasong, a Garo catechism and Gitelna Ringbo a collection of hymns³³.

To minister effectively to the little group of Catholics of Tura (Wadanangiri) Aloysius Rocca wanted to rent a dilapidated Bungalow at Bamanpara where he could reside temporarily. However Mr. Shaw, the D.C. wanted to maintain the "committee agreement" of the Protestant churches by which each area was parcelled out to a particular denomination from where others would be excluded.

At the behest of Nogen Diengdoh, a Khasi Catholic official in the D.C's office and Jobang Marak, who was the resident at Tura, Rocca applied for permission for renting a "Rest house" at Tura for six months. The fact that Sir Michael Keane the Roman Catholic Governor of Assam was aware of this application seemed to have compelled Shaw to grant the permission. On 6th June, 1933 the missionaries arrived at Tura and

took charge of their "rest house" resident to begin in earnest their work of evangelization and development of the Garo villages. Only after another three years, were the missionaries permitted by the Government to acquire land 'one mile away' from the Baptist mission on the Chandmari Hills³⁴.

Reasons for which Garos accepted Catholicism

The Catholic Missionaries were brought to Northern Mymensingh district for the very reasons for which other christian denominations were welcomed among the tribals. In their moment of crisis, the christian world vision fitted them and through education missionaries equipped them to face the so-called 'civilized world' and its competitions. In fact, every mission station had boarding school and each sub-centre a primary school, to educated the Garo children.

An elite Garo middle class among whom were Baptists as well as ex-Baptists and non-Christian Garos, realized that the Catholic Church had more prestigious educational institutions both in Dacca and Shillong and a very dedicated bunch of celibate men and women who were eager to share their poor and simple life while educating their children. Hence they found no reason why they should be excluded from Garo inhabited areas. According to a Holy Cross chronicler, "though untrained, the Garo mind is foreseeing and analytical; he scrutinizes evidence closely and demands ample proof before accepting a fact"³⁵. Hence the Exaggerated anti-catholic propaganda of a few Baptist preachers did not prevent some of the Garos to opt for the Catholic Faith. The desire of the numerous ex-Baptists to belong to an established Church could have prompted them to work actively for bringing the Catholic missionaries into their villages. Moreover, the fact that the Catholic missionary approved their dances and tolerated the moderate drinking of rice beer, could have further endeared him to many Garo Tribals³⁶.

The relentless socio-economic oppression to which the Garos especially of Mymensingh districts was subjected to, threw them into the arms of the Christian missionary, both catholic and protestant, who rescued them time and again from slavery and oppression. The ever-recurring

floods, epidemics and famines and the occasional droughts worsened the situation. After they had cleared the jungle land the Garos suffered eviction because the land was seldom settled in their name. The land was usually confiscated and sold to their shrewder Muslim and Hindu neighbour. Those who had a land-deed in their names often lost it to usurious money lenders whom the Missionaries referred to as "Loan-sharks".³⁷ Their terms of interest ranged from 37 1/2 to 150 percent.

Timothy Crowley one of the pioneer missionaries wrote in 1911³⁸:

The Garo true to type is a nomad, moving from jungle to jungle. Being peace-loving he is easily dispossessed by the Mussulman the terrible neighbour of the Garo. Then by ways indigenous, to places away from policemen the Garo has to go and seek hospitality deeper in the forest and wasteland....Christian Garos usually develop into tenants, being protected by the missionary from the tactics of the Mussulman.

Often the Garos migrated to far off areas like Tripura, Assam, Jalpaiguri where they got land for cultivation at more favourable terms. According to Norman Degrace a Missionary in Mymensingh, "The missionary's foremost task is to take up land problem with the land lords and provide the Garos with good Bengali lawyers to secure titles for their land."³⁹

The Baptist missionaries had successfully introduced a system of banking among the Garos of Mymensingh. The Holy Cross men set up a co-operative on the lines of the Chotanagpur Co-operative Credit Society set up by the German Jesuit John Hoffmann⁴⁰. Under Fr. Crowley such banks were established in every Mission centre of the Dacca Diocese. From 1931, Joseph Rick⁴¹ was assigned to Mymensingh to see to the establishment of the co-operative and to involve the Government agricultural experts to help the Garos with improved variety of cattle and seeds as well as methods of cultivation. Ricebanks were set up in every centre and the villagers themselves made sure of the repayment of loans, since they owned the bank. Emigration into Assam continued nevertheless, to our own days. The

Catholic Missionary particularly in Mymensingh districts had to pay often the unenviable role of a liberator, of his people from social and economic injustice and oppression.

Socio-political oppression in the erst-while East Pakistan forced thousands of Garos to flee across the border into Garo Hills strengthening the Garo catholic community in quality and numbers . The diocese of Tura now has a strength of over 100000 Garo catholics and continue the task of development and christian value formation.

Notes and References

1. Besides Carey's, **Jungle Book**, Gauhati, 1966 (reprint) there are more recent works; F.S.Downs, **The Mighty Works of God** and Milton Sangma, History of the American Baptist Missions in North East India (1836-1950), Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1987.
2. Cfr. P.C.Kar, **Achik Aro Achik Asong**, (Catholic Church Tura, 1973). In this work, Mr.Kar summed up in four and a half pages (71-6) the origin and growth of the Catholic Church in Tura. However there are a few inaccuracies in his work.
3. **Raymond J.Clancy**, an American Holy Cross missionary has compiled a two volume-work entitled '**Congregation of the Holy Cross in East Bengal**'.
4. **Peter Joseph Hurth** was born at Nittel, Rheinland (Germany) on 30th March,1857. He joined the Holy Cross Society in America from where he came to East Bengal as Bishop of Dacca in 1894. He resigned the bishopric on 15th Feb.1909 and died in Manila (Philippines) on 1st August,1935.
5. Clancy, **Congregation**, Ip.160-61.
6. **Francis 'Frederick Linneborn** was born at Hueston, Westphalia (W.Germany) on 27th May, 1864. He came to Dacca as its bishop in 1909. He died on 21st July, 1915.
7. **Jean-Marie Joseph Fleury** was born at Luitre (France) on 8th February,1873 and arrived in Dacca as a Holy Cross missionary in 1897. He died at Chittagong in 1951.
8. **Engene Lefebvre** was born in Assam on 7th Dec., 1873. He joined the Holy Cross Society as a lay-brother, in June 1900.

9. **Adolphe Francais** was born at Londeac (France) on 9th July 1860. He came to India as a Holy Cross missionary on 4th January, 1894. He died at Golla (Bangladesh) on 28 Nov., 1920.
- 10 **Timothy John Crowley** was born at Killmallock (Ireland) on 16th January, 1880. He joined the American Holy Cross Society in 1904 and came to India in 1907. He was nominated bishop in 1927. He died on 2nd Oct., 1945 in Dacca.
- 11 **Mathew S. Kearns** was born in New York on 16th August, 1882. He came to Dacca and was ordained priest in 1913. he died at Easton (massachusettes-USA) on 21st November, 1946.
- 12 **Joseph Anatole harel** was born at lewiston (Maine-USA) on 23rd February, 1886. He came to India in 1911 and was ordained a priest on 10th Jan., 1915. He died on 23rd August, 1942.
- 13 **Christopher Brooks** was born at Waterloo (Wisconsin) on 25th Dec., 1885. He came to Dacca as a Holy Cross priest in 1920 and worked many years among the Garos.
- 14 **Francis Sylvester Wyss** was born at Fort Wayne (indiana) on 1st March, 1894. He came to Dacca as a priest on 17th Dec., 1924.
- 15 **Bro. Severin**, born as William Smith at Brighton (New York) on 4th January, 1897, he came to Dacca as a Holy Cross brother in 1927 and returned home sick in 1935.
- 16 The Catechist Missionaries of Mary Immaculate from France had worked for a few years in Gauhati. In 1915 they returned to France.
- 17 **Francis P. Goodal** was born at Toledo (Ohio-USA) on 9th February, 1897 and arrived in Dacca/ as a Holy Cross priest on 7th December, 1926. He was Vicar General of Dacca from 1929-32. He returned to USA as mission procurator.
- 18 Today there are many Garo priests, brother and sisters both in India and Bangladesh.
- 19 On the work of Rudolph Fortaine in Assam
Cfr. C. Becker, **History of the Catholic Missions in Northeast India**, Vendrame Institute, Shillong 1980.p.48-61; 325-26.

- 20 **R.Fontaine**, A tour to the Garo Hills (manuscripts) The full discription of Fontaine's tour of Garo Hills, is available at Historical Documentation Centre, Sacred Heart College, Shillong.
- 21 P.C.Kar's assertion that Fontaine went to Tura to bless the marriage of a bandmaster is not the whole truth.
- 22 All the information on Jobang masrak was furnished to Fontaine by Col.Halliday, the Deputy Com missioner.
- 23 Fontaine,A tour, p.17-18.
- 24 On Garo marriage laws, particularly the law of Akim, Cfr. Giulio Costa, SDB **The Garo Code of Law** in Authropos, Vol.49,(1954) p. 1050f.
- 25 Fontaine, A tour, p.40-41.
- 26 On the exist of the Garman Salvatorians, Belgian Jesuits from Bengal came over to minister to the Catholics of Assam till the Salesians took over the mission from them in 1923.
- 27 Joseph Gil a Spaniard, was one of the eleven pioneers who came over to Assam on 15th Jan.,1922. He worked in Assam from February,1922 till 1925.
- 28 On Peter Shem Momin, Cfr. A.Pianazzi, **Don Bosco nell' Assam, la storia di una missione**, Editrice LDC, Turin, 1983,p.145.
- 29 According to Pianazzi,Rev.Harding had considerable influence over Walker. On persecution of the Catholics Cfr. kar, **Achik Aro**, p.71.
- 30 Vincent Seuderi from Sicily, Italy came to India in 1926, worked as Superior of Don Bosco, Gauhati from 1928 to 1933 when he was made provincial superior of all the salesians of Assam and Bengal.
- 31 **Archimedes Pianazzi** from N.Italy came to India in 1925 and after his ordination to Priesthood in 1931 worked among the Garos, first from Gauhati, then from Dhubri and later from Tura. He left Tura in 1938 but returned in 1942 and worked there for another four years.
- 32 Aloysius Rocca from Bologna, Italy, was an accomplished mathematician, who built a large transister radio at Tura and attracted many people to their "rest house". He returned to Europe in 1936. Cfr. Kar, Achik Aro, 72f.

- 33 Francis P. Goodal published a catechism and compiled another hymnal, around the same time at Ranikhong. Cfr. Clancy, II, p.79.
- 34 Prof. P.C. Kar has given a true account of the first years of the Catholic missionaries in Tura. For Baptist reaction to Catholics. Kar, Achik Aro, p.72f. Cfr. **Achikni Ripeng** (a baptist monthly) 1932, pp.115f.
- 35 Cfr. Clancy, **Congregation of the Holy Cross**, p. Through the process known as adaptation and inculturation.
- 36 The Catholic missionaries endeavour to preserve the culture and traditions of the converts and tolerate whatever does not offend the basic Christian Laws, following the methods of Robert de Nobili the missionary among the Brahmins of madurai (1606-56).
- 37 Cfr. Clancy, I, p.240f.
- 38 T.J. Crowley to Fr. Franch (1911) in Holy Cross Archives, Rome.
- 39 Clancy, II, p.47f.
- 40 On the great work of Socio-economic development of the Adivasis undertaken by Hoffmann, Cfr. Peter Tete, **A Missionary Social Worker In India: J.B. Hoffmann, The Chotanagpur Tenancy Act and the Catholic Cooperatives** (1893-1928) Gregorian University, Rome, 1984.
- 41 **Joseph M. Rick** was born at Hoston (Texas) on 1st June, 1900. He came to Dacca as a Holy Cross priest on 26th Nov., 1929 and worked in Mymensingh for many years.